

Perish 376

Chapter 376: Bricks' Ambition

Quintus actually predicted the advance route of the Pannonian main alliance forces! ... This not only impressed all the generals but also allowed them to set their minds at ease and continue to implement the new plan.

At night, the Nix Soldiers blew their horns and shouted. They made a stance as if they were going to attack the camp at night, scaring the Segestica people inside the camp into staying alert. The Nix Army continued to create noise in shifts, while Anrotas and his tribesmen couldn't get a good night's sleep...

Early the next morning, a minority of Nix soldiers continued to feign attacks on the camp, a few continued to guard the pontoon bridges, and the fleet patrolled the river, but most soldiers, after roughly setting up the camp, went inside the camp tents to rest. Yet, soldiers occasionally wandering around the camp and countless cooking smoke that rose with the hours allowed the Segestica Warriors standing on the wooden walls to still feel the presence of the Nix Army...

At night, the Nix soldiers continued to cause a commotion outside the camp, while the Segestica people gritted their teeth inside the camp, helpless...

Deep into the night, the Segestica people, exhausted after two days of torment, finally couldn't hold on and fell into a deep sleep. It was at this moment that the main force of the Nix Army, under the bright moonlight, began to quietly withdraw from the camp...

On the third day, the feigned attacks on the camp, the guarding of the pontoon bridges, the land and water blockade, soldiers wandering in the camp, numerous rising cooking smokes, and the night's commotion... everything proceeded as usual.

Anrotas and his tribesmen didn't notice anything unusual, only that their hatred for Cabdes was growing day by day...

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A seemingly endless line snaked along the riverbank... Watching all this from the small hill beside it, Bricks felt full of ambition.

This year, it was Bricks' turn to preside over the tribal alliance. He quickly issued invitations to convene a tribal alliance meeting, and at the meeting, he proposed forming an alliance army to swiftly eliminate the newly arrived Nix, to avert future troubles against the Dacians. Through his efforts, the proposal was passed.

At that time, other Great Chiefs were surprised by Bricks's rare display of such aggressive drive. After he explained the reason, everyone understood: the Nix had intruded into Brochi's territory, plundering wildly and inciting many Skodisqi slaves to escape. To this day, it still happened from time to time. If left unchecked, it could likely spread to other major tribes' territories, undermining the stability of the entire Pannonian Alliance... This was the primary reason other tribal leaders agreed to this proposal.

They simply did not realize that Bricks had another reason for initiating this war — to expand Brochi's territory.

In fact, contrary to Andres's disdain, Bricks was not merely seeking a life of comfort without ambition.

Bricks had previously presented such an image out of necessity. After all, his territory was surrounded on three sides — south, north, and east — by other Pannonian Tribes. Only the west seemed open for expansion, but it was mostly mountainous and hilly, occupied by the Aldeans. He didn't want to take too much risk, so he focused his efforts on managing his territory first, especially since it had only been a few years since they defeated the Skodisqi people and reclaimed lost land. This gave the impression that while other tribes (except Mazi) were aggressively expanding, he was content in his own land.

It was not until Segestica dealt a heavy blow to the Aldeans that Bricks seized the opportunity to advance westward, defeating the army patched together by the Alde Tribe residing to the west, sweeping through the entire hilly area, and even advancing to the east bank of the Kolana River.

However, due to issues with military supplies, the general discomfort of his tribesmen with mountain living, and the Aldeans' terrain-based harassment at his rear, Bricks, fearing greater losses, had to painfully retreat, abandoning the newly occupied vast hilly land.

But he did not stop there; he began dividing the land beyond the western border to some tribal nobles, persuading them to lead their tribesmen to settle there, wanting them to gradually get used to mountain and hilly living, to slowly consume toward the west until reaching the banks of the Kolana River...

Unfortunately, this plan was completely destroyed after just a year or two by a sudden raid from the Nix.

Frustrated, Bricks realized the Nix were a major threat, and he felt that, despite the natural barrier of hills and mountains, Brochi's western border was still somewhat unsafe, so he proposed a two-pronged military advance under the guise of "facilitating the march of a large army and better defeating the Nix," which gained the approval of most Great Chiefs.

Thus, naturally, his route became the main force, led by his tribal army, leading over forty thousand troops marching mightily toward the banks of the Kolana River. At that time, they would conveniently sweep aside the Alde Tribe living by the Kolana River, once again heavily striking the Aldeans. Afterward, trusted Brochi nobles whom he had arranged would lead their tribesmen to occupy the remaining villages left by the Aldeans at the banks of the Codona River and settle down, thereby pushing the western border line to the Kolana River in one fell swoop. The vast hilly area in between could slowly be filled by tribesmen, and in the future, they could use the Kolana River as a springboard to continue conquering the Aldeans' Murenica River...

Of course, for this plan to be realized, the most important thing was to defeat the Nix.

Knowing this clearly, Bricks did not bother to argue with Cabdes about "his army having to be the first to engage the Nix."

The biggest problem with the offensive route from Brochi's western border to the banks of the Kolana River was the supply of military provisions. The journey was distant and transportation inconvenient, plus the sizeable army could easily be forced to retreat halfway due to a shortage of food.

Bricks had previously suffered in this regard, and unwilling to accept it, he hadn't been idle after retreating; he had repeatedly personally led people into the hilly areas to explore and had long since identified the best marching route.

Due to having nearly two months of preparation time for this expedition, he ordered his subordinates to secretly lead the tribesmen into the area and set up several camps along the predetermined marching route, stockpiling the gathered provisions in the camps ahead of time and stationing a few warriors there. Since these camps were far from the northern mountain ranges, the Nix scouts hadn't detected them, let alone the Aldeans who were huddled at the banks of the Kolana River, afraid to move east.

With adequate preparation in advance, the Pannonian Army, which Bricks was part of, had a relatively smooth march, reaching another small river only half a day after leaving the Kupa River.

This river meandered westward and eventually joined the Kolana River. The terrain on both sides of the river was relatively flat, and several Alde Tribe villages were once built here. Now, several temporary camps constructed by Bricks were distributed from east to west along the river.

Three days later, the Pannonian Army approached the Kolana River.

Since Maximus hadn't informed the Aldeans in advance that "the Pannonians might launch a major offensive," it was only a few days ago, after it was clearly confirmed that two Pannonian armies were setting off, that he had Pigeris inform the Aldeans.

The upper echelons of the Aldean tribe were shocked upon receiving this news. They sought help from the Nix on one hand and urgently convened the elders to discuss countermeasures on the other.

Pigeris responded to them without hesitation: Leader Maximus would gather all the soldiers to aid their allies, but he hoped that before his army arrived, they would hold on to the villages by the banks of the Kolana River, not allowing the enemy to pass smoothly.

Alistacas, acting as the Great Chief, readily promised.

However, at the Alde Tribe meeting, southern tribe leaders headed by Ambrosius unanimously agreed that the Pannonians were coming with great momentum and an enormous army, and it would be hard to resist even if the tribe gathered all its strength. To avoid excessive losses, they suggested temporarily withdrawing to preserve strength, allowing the Nix to confront the Pannonian army alone for a while, as it had been done in the past. This would let the tribe observe both sides' battles before responding.

Alistacas was very displeased. As the soon-to-be Great Chief, he did not want to tarnish his credibility and was eager to showcase his bravery. Yet, apart from a few elders like Cleobrotas and Budocaribas opposing, other leaders chose to retreat (due to the urgency, most northern and western leaders couldn't arrive promptly).

Alistacas was reluctantly forced to agree to Ambrosius and others' proposal.

Yet, the Aldean tribesmen at the Kolana River, who had lived there for generations, couldn't just withdraw at a moment's notice. While leaders exhausted their words to persuade them, the Pannonians, like a tide, surged to the north bank of the Kolana River. Facing the unwilling Aldeans, they effortlessly broke through village after village, even crossing to the south bank to sweep through the Aldean villages settled there.

This caused panic among the entire Aldean tribe because the Pannonians were closing in on the Aldean's main camp.

The terminally ill Acoupaigos, upon hearing this devastating news, was so shocked he died immediately.

The Aldean's upper echelons, however, had no time to hold a funeral for him. They carried out an emergency military mobilization while continuously sending people to seek help from the Nix.

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"Madam, Capito requests an audience," Naisuya walked into the main hall of the main house and respectfully said to Nexia.

Before Maximus led the army away, he appointed Capito as the temporary City Lord of Snowdonia, responsible for managing the entire town, while Nexia, as the First Lady of the Nix Tribe, needed to represent him in overseeing the main house. If there were important matters, Capito had to inform her and obtain her approval before proceeding.

Chapter 377: Nexia and Geniandafra

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In the past, during times of war, Nexia was only responsible for medical affairs. Now, she had to address all the issues plaguing Snowdonia due to war. Having been entrusted with great responsibilities by her husband, she refused to be a mere follower who simply nodded in agreement. She usually consulted with Capito before letting him execute decisions. After only a few days, the overwhelming tasks started to wear her down, leaving her dizzy and exhausted. So, upon hearing Capito's name, she felt an instant headache and asked irritably, "What does he want now?"

"Well... Lady Geniandafra, she—" Naisuya hadn't finished speaking when Nexia slammed the table hard. "Did she sneak out again only to be dragged back by Capipi?!"

"Yes." Naisuya quickly bowed her head.

"Our leader is currently leading troops in the front lines against the enemy, and as his wife, instead of setting a good example here, she's causing endless trouble!" Nexia said angrily. "I don't even have the face to meet Capito right now! Naisuya, have your mother bring two strong women over and escort Geniandafra here immediately. According to the rules of the main house, she'll receive corporal punishment!"

"Madam, are you saying to 'escort' Lady Geniandafra here? And actually 'punish' her?!" Naisuya thought she'd misheard and couldn't help but ask again.

"That's right! Have your mother bring her over! Hurry up, and don't waste my time waiting!" Nexia urged impatiently.

Naisuya hurried to the kitchen and informed Acronis about the matter.

Acronis laughed heartily. "Nexia should've done this a long time ago!"

"Mother, Geniandafra is the leader's wife!" Naisuya reminded her cautiously. "If you treat her like this, it might upset the leader!"

"What do you know!" Acris glared, grabbing the firewood stick by the stove. "Ever since this Aldean woman came here, she's been restless. Now she dares disobey orders repeatedly during wartime. The

leader despises such behavior. Back in Italy, he often dished out punishments. Since he's not here now, we'll enforce the rules ourselves!"

With that, Acris indeed called upon two maidservants and marched straight toward the courtyard gate.

After Naisuya exited the hall, Florist Lusia, who had been accompanying Nexia, spoke up, "Sister, are you really going to punish Geniandafra?"

"It's time she learned a lesson so she stops treating this place like Alde!" Nexia said sternly, her expression hard.

Florist Lusia opened her mouth but refrained from further persuasion.

Instead, Nexia spoke with concern, "Sister, if you feel uncomfortable witnessing what's about to happen, you can head back to your room for now."

Florist Lusia hesitated for a moment and softly said, "Um... Sister, I... I'll leave now."

Nexia nodded.

Just as Florist Lusia left, shouts erupted outside: "Let me go! Let me go! If you don't release me, I'll make sure the leader breaks your hands when he returns!——"

"The leader would never break the hands of these sisters who endured hardships alongside him!" Nexia sharply interrupted Geniandafra's words. "On the contrary, if he knew what you've been up to these days and the nonsense you're shouting now, he'd definitely have someone whip you until your backside is ruined!"

Geniandafra looked furiously at Nexia sitting in the center of the hall. Her eyes burned with rage. "Nexia, what right do you have to treat me this way? Let me go immediately! Otherwise, when the leader returns, I'll repay this humiliation double!——"

"I'll tell you now exactly what right I have to punish you!" Nexia stood up and, with righteous indignation, stared at Geniandafra. "I am the First Lady of the Nix Tribe, empowered by specific decrees to manage the leader's household affairs. For any of the leader's family members who violate the rules of the main house or disrupt order, I have the authority to enforce discipline!"

The leader assigned Capito full responsibility for the defense of this settlement. Three days ago, Capito issued an order—no one was permitted to enter or leave the stockade! Everyone in this settlement strictly adhered to that command, except you. You acted as if this order didn't exist and have now tried to sneak out of the gates for the third time!—"

Geniandafra shouted, "The Pannonians are destroying the Aldeans' tribes! Slaughtering my people! My uncle has sent countless messengers pleading for your help, but Capito has done nothing!—"

"All the able-bodied men in this settlement have been taken by the leader to fight. What do you expect Capito to do?" Acronis interjected.

Geniandafra immediately yelled, "Then I must go to the leader myself and urge him to bring the army back from the north to rescue the Aldeans!"

"Such an important matter—Capito has surely sent word to the leader!" Acronis sneered.

Geniandafra retorted loudly, "But the army is still in the north and hasn't returned! I must request this personally from the leader—"

"You shut your mouth!" Nexia roared, her expression severe. "Matters of the tribe are for the leader and the other chiefs to handle. Outsiders have no right to inquire, let alone intervene! This is a rule everyone in the Nix Tribe knows and abides by!"

As the leader's wife, instead of setting a good example for the people during this critical time, you've disobeyed orders and violated decrees repeatedly, stirring unrest in the settlement! Acronis, according to our tribe's laws, what punishment should be carried out for such actions?!"

Acronis responded loudly, "As per our customs, during wartime, disobedience of orders warrants corporal punishment at the very least, and execution in severe cases! Repeated offenses result in exile at minimum!"

Geniandafra began to panic. Struggling desperately to free herself from the grip of the two strong women restraining her, she shouted with faux bravado, "Nonsense! Utter nonsense! I don't understand your Nix laws! My grandfather is Acoupaigos, the Great Chief of the Aldeans! If you dare act recklessly, he'll make you pay! He'll definitely——"

Nexia remained unmoved and said coldly, "Since this is her first offense, let's proceed with corporal punishment."

Acronis unhesitatingly barked to her subordinates, "Pin her down!"

The two strong women seized Geniandafra's shoulders and forced her downward, simultaneously hooking her legs with theirs.

With a heavy thud, Geniandafra fell face down to the ground, her curses abruptly silenced.

Seeing Nexia's lips subtly move but not utter a command, Acronis immediately understood: strike with half strength.

She gleefully raised the firewood stick high and delivered a solid blow to Geniandafra's plump backside.

"Ah! Ah!..." Geniandafra let out piercing shrieks. Pampered and spoiled all her life, she had never suffered such pain before. After only two strikes, tears began streaming down her cheeks.

At that moment, commotion could be heard outside the hall. Nexia was about to instruct Naisuya to check it out.

The Guard Captain walked in first, his gaze unwavering, and reported to Nexia, "Madam, earlier when Steward Acronis ordered us to guard the hall to prevent unauthorized entry, Lady Geniandafra's

attendants tried to barge in. They were stopped by the guards. Eventually, they got into a scuffle with the guards and even injured one of them. The guards had no choice but to subdue them..."

"You did the right thing!" Nexia praised loudly before continuing sternly, "The fact that Geniandafra has misbehaved likely stems from their encouragement! For violating tribal laws themselves, they deserve an even harsher punishment! You are entrusted to handle this matter!"

"...Understood!" The Guard Captain left the hall, and soon screams echoed loudly outside.

A while later, Naisuya re-entered the hall, glanced at the scene, and quickly approached Nexia. She started whispering a few words.

Nexia immediately said loudly, "No need to whisper. Speak openly, so everyone can hear!"

Following orders, Naisuya complied, "Madam, Capito just sent another messenger to report that the leader is leading the army back from the north!—"

Still lying on the ground after the punishment, Geniandafra instantly stopped crying upon hearing this.

"However, the leader has not entered the settlement, nor has he rested nearby. He only instructed Capito to send the pre-prepared bread to the troops. The army must push forward quickly to Kolana River!" Naisuya finished.

Geniandafra froze for a moment, her worry dissipating. But now, her overwhelming grievances and the pain in her backside rushed to the surface, causing her to burst into torrents of tears...

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Near Validosi, the Nix Army finally arrived and retrieved the scouts previously sent forward.

"Report to the leader: The Pannonians' vanguard troops are close to reaching Kolana Swamp!"

Kolana Swamp... Maximus felt a slight jolt: They're not far from us!

Suddenly, a commotion arose within the frontline units.

"Leader, we've detected Pannonian scouts!" The First Legion messenger rushed forward to announce.

The enemy is approaching!... Maximus tightened his grip on the reins.

"Leader, we should quickly occupy the elevated hills east of Kolana Swamp!" Quintus suggested loudly.

"You're right." Maximus decisively ordered the army to speed up their march.

After issuing the directive, Maximus looked up at the sky. The radiant sun had only just climbed halfway into the heavens.

"It seems that today we may decide the outcome against the Pannonians," Maximus murmured.

"Isn't that what we're hoping for? To handle the enemies here swiftly so we can hurry back to Westeni," Quintus said.

"Leader, rest assured. The Pannonians will certainly be slower than us in preparing for battle. Our soldiers will have enough time to recover their strength." Flanitnus reassured.

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Chapter 378: Armies Face Off

Maximus revealed a confident smile: "Everyone, it seems that after defeating the Segestica people last year, we are about to savor the taste of victory once again."

Everyone around him laughed heartily.

As the Pannonian Army swept through the villages of the Aldeans on both banks of the Kolana River, Bricks and the other Great Chiefs were naturally mindful that their real enemy could arrive at any moment. They consistently dispatched scouts to monitor movements in the north. Upon receiving the intel that "the Nix Army is about to arrive," the Great Chiefs had already begun gathering their forces dispersed along the Kolana River banks and were now advancing toward Nix Territory.

Originally, the swift success of raiding the Aldean villages along the Kolana River gave Bricks a surge of ambition. He intended to lead the armies already stationed on the river's west bank through the valley, continuing westward toward the Murenica River, and testing an assault on the Aldeans residing there to gauge their strength.

However, he quickly encountered a significant issue—the army was running low on food supplies.

Despite Bricks and the other three Great Chiefs having made considerable preparations in advance, none of them had any experience leading such a massive army on a "long expedition." They lacked sufficient personnel skilled in logistics and arithmetic to properly assess their army's daily food consumption.

It's worth noting that last year, when Andres led an alliance of thirty thousand troops to siege the Nix's makeshift camp for less than ten days, he nearly depleted the Segestica Tribe's entire food reserves, sparking resentment among that tribe's people. But this time, the Panoni Alliance Army numbered as many as 43,000, and in addition to transporting food supplies, they had recruited 4,500 Scodisqi slaves. Such a massive force was decentralized and struggled to efficiently manage food supply. Even though the armies had conquered many Aldean villages along the Kolana River and seized a good amount of grain, the warriors who occupied those villages consumed most of it in celebratory feasts, leaving only minimal replenishments.

Fortunately, sharp-eyed Bricks finally noticed the problem. After urgently discussing it with the other three Great Chiefs, they decided to regroup their forces and accelerate their march toward Nix Territory, aiming to swiftly defeat the Nix people and seize their food supplies to alleviate their predicament.

Thus, upon learning that the Nix Army was approaching, the Great Chiefs were not alarmed but instead delighted; this would save them significant time!

Previously, the Pannonian Army had marched in a long column formation along the banks of the Kolana River. Now, with the enemy approaching, it was no longer viable to proceed in this manner.

After a brief discussion among the four Great Chiefs, the troop formation was adjusted. At the very front of the column, near the eastern bank of the Kolana River, was the Brochi Army, positioned on the far left flank. (In this mission for the Pannonian Tribe Alliance, the Brochi Army had been designated as the vanguard due to their familiarity with Kolana River geography, gained from previous expeditions several years ago and last year's participation in Andres's siege of the Nix's temporary camp). Moving westward from the Brochi Army were the Maziyi Army, Disone Army, and Perustai Army, arranged side by side, advancing simultaneously.

This region was a hilly terrain. The further away from the riverbank one went, the higher the elevation rose, though none of the hills exceeded fifty meters, and the slopes were relatively gentle. Since the Aldeans had lived here for generations and extensively harvested trees over the years, the area lacked dense forestation, making it more suitable for Pannonian troop movement.

The Pannonian Alliance Army struggled forward across the undulating hills in a wide, dispersed formation. After about half an hour, the various forces simultaneously halted their advance—they had spotted an imposing iron wall standing atop the higher hills ahead.

Despite Cabdes's detailed description during the tribal alliance meeting of past battles between Segestica and Nix, allowing the Great Chiefs to familiarize themselves with the Nix Army, witnessing it firsthand made them gasp in astonishment: all the Nix soldiers were clad entirely in armor, their individual protection was unbelievably thorough!

After a brief silence, Bricks suddenly burst into laughter: "These Nix people are so foolish! Last time, relying on this full armor and tight formations, they managed to achieve victory against Andres's army despite their smaller numbers. Now, they think they can use the same tactic to defeat us.

But they don't understand—this is a mountainous area with uneven terrain. Standing there might be fine now, but once the battle begins, they won't be able to maintain those dense formations. Moreover, fighting in heavy armor on this terrain makes them far less agile than our warriors. The longer the battle drags on, the less of a match they'll be for us!"

The Maziyi Great Chief Maitilis also rallied his spirits, proclaiming with determination: "Don't be intimidated just because they're standing on a hill in formation—it might look imposing, but according

to Cabdes, even if the entire Nix army mobilizes, our numbers still outweigh theirs by more than double. If we press forward all at once, we can overwhelm them entirely!"

Bricks chimed in again: "And don't forget, we have over a thousand cavalry—"

Disone Great Chief Demikas promptly interjected: "The cavalry can't charge up a hill; otherwise, all the horses will be ruined."

Maitilis proposed another strategy: "We can rely on our warriors for direct combat, while the cavalry maneuvers around to attack them from behind at a critical moment. Victory will be ours!"

It's said that the Nix Tribe has many highly skilled craftsmen who can build those truly large bridges spanning rivers. Once we conquer their territory, Demikas and Pagiras, your tribes can also have some of the Nix craftsmen, and soon you'll be able to erect large bridges over the Delaware River!"

Demikas and Perustai Great Chief Pagiras exchanged glances, their eyes burning with excitement.

Although the Pannonian Tribe Alliance was generally cooperative, it was far from being a unified coalition. For instance, Desitia Great Chief Temagis had only committed half of his tribe's troops, and Demikas and Pagiras had each sent just 40% of their forces, with the combined troop count of the two large tribes barely reaching 13,000. Especially upon noticing Bricks leveraging the campaign for his own benefit, the two chiefs had been deliberately withholding their efforts.

But hearing this now, both were tempted. Demikas immediately declared, "We demand at least half of the Nix craftsmen."

Bricks was about to retort, arguing "No, the distribution must reflect the proportion of troops each tribe provided," but quickly decided to change tactics, saying instead: "If you want half the craftsmen, it'll depend on your performance in the upcoming battle against the Nix. Otherwise, based solely on your troop count—"

"Our warriors may be fewer in number, but every single one is worth two or three of yours!" Pagiras proudly countered. "Your Brochi warriors may be many, but they're not much good in a fight—"

"Is this really the time to argue?" Maitilis reprimanded, cutting them off. "Let's go with what Bricks said—each tribe will earn its share of the Nix craftsmen based on their performance in the upcoming battle. Agreed?"

"Agreed!" the other three chiefs echoed one after another.

"What about Cabdes and Temagis?" Pagiras asked unexpectedly. As Desitia's neighbor, he maintained a fairly good relationship with Temagis.

The others were momentarily stunned—they had forgotten about the two chiefs.

Bricks quickly responded: "We're the ones bearing the brunt of the fight against the Nix's main forces. Our sacrifices are greater, so we should naturally claim more! They can get plenty of the Nix's wealth and slaves, but as for the craftsmen... they don't need to share in those."

"Agreed!" This time, the agreement was nearly unanimous.

Having reached consensus, the four Great Chiefs began rallying their respective tribal armies into formation.

Their deployment was straightforward—following their previous marching sequence, and mirroring the enemy's battle formation. Using the eastern bank of the Kolana River as the starting point, the Brochi, Maziyi, Disone, and Perustai armies extended west to east in an organized formation.

During the entire Pannonians' deployment process, the Nix Army remained atop the hill, motionless, like a long iron wall.

Upon closer inspection, however, it became evident that the Nix Army was arranged as staggered centurion square formations, stretching across the hill from east to west, with substantial gaps between each square. It was not a rigid, tightly packed snake formation.

Moreover, the soldiers weren't just standing there idly. Once their formations were set, most sat on the soft soil of the hill, taking the time to rest, adjust their armor and weapons, and regain their strength. At

the same time, they gazed down the hill, engaging in lively discussions about the Pannonians' formation...

"The Pannonians sure have a lot of troops—this must be tens of thousands of them!"

"Numbers alone mean nothing! Just look at how chaotic their formation is—it's obvious they haven't undergone proper military training. Even with their numbers, they won't be able to exert their full combat power. Instead, they'll create problems for themselves when their attack is disrupted."

"If we launched a surprise attack now, wouldn't their chaotic positioning give us an opportunity to defeat them?"

"It's possible, but what's the point? They'd retreat quickly, and you wouldn't be able to inflict significant casualties. You'd just tire yourself out for no gain. It's better to wait for them to come to us for slaughter!"

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Such light-hearted discussions in the face of an impending battle were typical of seasoned Nix veterans. With their extensive combat experience, many had repeatedly participated in team officer training programs led by the Military Department. As such, their conversations weren't mere idle chatter—they contained genuine insights, easing the tension and anxiety for the new recruits listening nearby.

Gowes, who had once led his compatriots in defecting mid-battle during the conflict between Nix and Segestica, and subsequently rampaged across Segestica Territory for several months, was also present among the formations.

Chapter 379: The New 20 Noble System

When Gowes first joined the Nix Army, he was still a bit unruly. However, after a few punishments and extended exposure to the environment and his companions, he gradually went along with the crowd.

Although he consistently excelled in every military training session for Reserve Tribe Members, it did not elevate his status within the army. Like other Reserve Tribe Members, he remained just a rookie soldier.

But this rookie soldier was neither as nervous nor uneasy as most rookies. He also didn't pay much attention to the veterans' conversations, keeping his gaze fixed on a soldier sitting in front of him. Finally, he couldn't resist and gave him a light kick.

When the soldier turned around to see it was Gowes, he immediately glared at him with hostility. "Gowes, are you looking to fight me again?!"

"Kid, let me be clear up front!" Gowes glared back without backing down, giving a low warning: "When the fighting starts in a moment, if you dare to retreat or cause trouble in the ranks, I won't hesitate to deal with you!"

As Gowes spoke, he shook the short sword in his hand as a threat.

Prisus, who often clashed with Gowes during military training, fell silent in the face of this provocation. Not just because he was a Reserve Tribe Member of the Nix Tribe, but also because he had once been a Segestica and a Panlonian. Now, he was about to fight against his own people.

The dispersal of more than a thousand Segestica Reserve Tribe Members across the First, Second, and Third Legions had been Maximus' proposal. After deliberation in the Military Department, it had been implemented six months ago to help them integrate more quickly into the tribe, so they could contribute more to its development in the future.

Of course, the primary enemy facing the Nix Tribe next would be the Pannonians. Could these Segestica Reserve Tribe Members cause problems in the battle against the Pannonians?

Maximus and the Military Department were not too worried, as there were, on average, only four or five Segestica people in each Centurion unit, leaving them vastly outnumbered. Moreover, they were dispersed among various squads and surrounded by their adversarial Skodisqi Reserve Members, who, like Gowes, would keep a close eye on their former enemies. Even if someone had other thoughts during the battle, they could not stir up much trouble.

At this moment, Prisus—like most of his companions—even though knowing there were no Segestica warriors among the upcoming enemies, felt a tangle of complex emotions. He had no desire to respond to Gowes' noisy provocations beside him.

Just then, a familiar voice came from the front: "Brothers, you've all seen it. The Pannonian army is huge, far larger than ours. Are you afraid?!"

Prisus lifted his eyes to see Centurion Tini Bazus standing with hands on his hips at the front of the formation. His words immediately sparked a commotion: "Captain, are you joking? In all our past major battles, weren't we always up against outnumbered foes? And yet, we always emerged victorious. No matter how many more enemies come, we won't be scared!"

"Not only are we unafraid, we're excited and overjoyed! The more soldiers they have, the greater the glory and merits we'll earn when we defeat them!"

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"Brothers!" Tini Bazus shouted louder, signaling the soldiers to quiet down as he pressed his hands downward. "Two months ago, the First Legion gained the upper hand. They participated in the Aldean fight against the Otarat people and earned battle merits, with some even receiving promotions. Now, it's finally the Second Legion's turn to shine on the battlefield!"

"Just now, the Legion Commander told us this battle has been classified by the Military Department as Second Level. If we become the first Legion to secure victory, every one of you brothers will receive a Fifth-class Merit!

When that happens, my congratulations to the Reserve Tribe Members among you! After this battle, you will be directly promoted to Second-class Tribe Members, gaining 60 acres of land, your own house, your own fields to farm, your own cattle and sheep to raise, a woman you love to marry, and plenty of children to care for... You will live an abundant life!"

The newly implemented Twenty Peerage System fundamentally restructured advancement through military merits. Gone were the days of cutting off enemy ears to calculate merits. Now, merits were divided into six classes:

First-class Merits were for massive wars that annihilated nations, states, or tribes. The commander responsible for leading the army to victory in such wars would receive First-class Merit, with Legion

Commanders involved receiving Second-class Merit, Great Captains earning Third-class, Centurions gaining Fourth-class, and soldiers obtaining Fifth-class.

Second-class Merits applied to pivotal battles critical to the tribe's survival. Commanders would earn Second-class Merits, Legion Commanders Third-class, Great Captains Fourth-class, Centurions Fifth-class, and soldiers Sixth-class.

And so on—the less crucial the battle, the lower the merit awarded.

An ordinary soldier participating in a minor skirmish, even without engaging the enemy directly, could earn a Sixth-class Merit if the battle was won. One Sixth-class Merit could allow a Reserve Tribe Member to be promoted to an ordinary tribe member. However, an ordinary tribe member would need three Sixth-class Merits—or one Fifth-class Merit—to qualify for promotion to a Second-class Tribe Member.

For ordinary soldiers, a Fifth-class Merit was the highest honor most could hope to achieve. Only exceptional luck in killing a key enemy commander to secure a decisive victory might earn them merits beyond their station.

Conversely, Legion Commanders and Great Captains were never eligible for Fifth- or Sixth-class Merits. Their high-level distinctions were essential for advancing to knighthood and beyond, and such lower merits were excluded from their records. Thus, to rise higher after becoming a knight, soldiers had to attain the rank of Centurion or higher.

Of course, earning merits required victories. This meant both officers and soldiers had to work together wholeheartedly to secure success.

Under the new Twenty Peerage System, a Second Level-rated battle like the upcoming one should only grant ordinary soldiers Sixth-class Merits. So why did Tini Bazus claim they could earn Fifth-class Merits?

Because the new system included special provisions, such as rewarding the first soldiers to scale walls in a siege with a merit upgrade, or granting higher merits to units securing an early advantage in a pitched battle. This encouraged soldiers to compete courageously, avoiding a collective handout mindset.

As soon as Tini Bazus finished speaking, the Skodisqi soldiers in the Centurion unit could not help but cheer. Having endured hardship, they never dared to dream of such a beautiful future, now seemingly within reach.

Gowes, however, did not cheer like his companions. His mind remained heavy with thoughts of his suffering compatriots still left behind in the Segestica Territory.

Even though he knew his promotion would require fighting and slaughtering his own people, Prisus couldn't help but feel tempted. He understood that the bright future painted by Tini Bazus wasn't mere rhetoric—it was something he saw every day. The Nix tribespeople genuinely lived such lives.

He thought about his own years in the Segestica Tribe. The land he had was less than 30 acres, and despite year-round hard work, whatever he cultivated was overseen by the nobles. Each autumn, a portion of crops was collected, and during periods of continuous tribal wars, those collections grew heavier, leaving only enough for subsistence. A few tribe members who refused to pay were eventually expelled.

By contrast, the Nix tribespeople had much better lives. They submitted less but retained more. Not only did the tribe build infrastructure to improve agricultural output, they also taught better farming practices to yield greater harvests... Thinking of these things, Prisus found his heart unsettled.

Tini Bazus didn't pay attention to the subtly changing expressions of the Segestica soldiers in the ranks. He continued shouting: "Brothers who are Official Tribe Members! You're either Second-class or First-class Tribe Members. After this battle, those who already have some merits as Second-class Tribe Members can earn one more Fifth-class Merit to advance to First-class status, along with an additional 20 acres of land to cultivate more crops and raise more livestock.

First-class Tribe Members may not yet have enough merits to rise further, but the leader has declared that this battle is not only crucial but also dire, given the vastly outnumbered enemy. So he has decided to offer bonus rewards!

If any Centurion unit becomes the first to break the enemy lines or rout them, they will be awarded a Third-class Merit, meaning each member will receive a Fourth-class Merit. That's enough to upgrade everyone's rank by one level—some could even rise several levels!"

Pointing toward the hill below, Tini Bazus shouted triumphantly: "Brothers, to us, these Pannonians represent land and wealth. The more of them there are, the more merits we stand to gain! Now, let's fight bravely, defeat them, and advance our ranks—aiming to become the tribe's next nobles as soon as possible!"

The soldiers erupted in cheers, brimming with excitement.

Other Centurion units were similarly animated, as the Centurions had received the same instructions from the Legion Commander and delivered similar motivational speeches.

A wave of jubilation swept across the long formation of the Nix Army.

"Look, the leader's strategy works wonders. Morale is extraordinarily high now!" The young attendant Tilius, who accompanied Maximus, couldn't help but marvel at the sight.

Tilius was one of the children of the Lukelia veterans who had followed Maximus during the rebellion.

"Of course," replied the attendant Marcus. "Everyone wants to earn merits and advance."

"But..." The other attendant, Frisarus, a young slave from Campania, seemed puzzled. "During the Political Affairs Hall meeting where I was taking notes, I heard Lord Volenus mention our tribe hardly has any land left. Yet after this battle, nearly 10,000 Reserve Tribe Members will be promoted, requiring over 500,000 acres of land! Where could the tribe possibly find so much land to distribute?"

Chapter 380: Adjusting Deployment

"Five hundred thousand acres of land..." Tilius quickly calculated with his fingers, his face instantly showing an expression of shock: "We really need that much land—it's an astonishing figure! We—"

"A bunch of fools!" A familiar voice reached the attendants' ears: "Our tribe doesn't have that much land, but the Pannonians do! Once we thoroughly defeat their army and seize the opportunity to attack their territories, will they still have the strength to resist?"

"Brother Akegu!" The five attendants saw the familiar figure and quickly stood up, warmly greeting him.

"You all—don't you understand your responsibilities? Do you have the luxury of idling here at a time like this? Snap out of it! Keep your eyes wide open, ears sharp, and stay close to the leader at all times, ready to carry out any task he assigns to your utmost ability!" Akegu shouted sternly, his face stiff.

"Yes, Brother Akegu." Since Maximus established the youth team within the Supply Camp, Akegu had been one of its prominent leaders and held considerable authority, so the five youths responded with genuine obedience rather than perfunctory compliance.

Akegu patted the youths on their shoulders to encourage them, then quickly walked toward the cliff top not far away.

The hill occupied by the Nix Army was elevated, yet mostly gentle in slope. Only the easternmost part of the Nix Formation rose abruptly with steep terrain, which is why Maximus and his command center temporarily stationed themselves not in the middle-back of the formation but at the eastern flank. Utilizing this higher position, they carefully observed the enemy below.

"Leader! Lord Quintus! I've returned!" Akegu called out loudly as he approached the two men standing ahead.

Maximus turned back to look at him, his face breaking into a smile, but he didn't say a word, as Akegu still served as a subordinate in the Staff Department and was currently acting under their orders.

"Report your observations in detail," Quintus commanded, and the subordinate next to him immediately spread out a sheet of paper and picked up an ink pen, preparing to take notes.

"I... I made my way to our right flank and stealthily... stealthily approached halfway down the hillside for closer observation of the enemy. I found that they carried flags painted with fish patterns, which likely signify the Brochi Tribe within the Pannonian Army."

The formation stretched eight or nine miles from west to east, its terrain uneven. Despite Akegu's physical endurance, his sprint left him slightly breathless. Still, he tried his best to speak clearly and steadily: "I counted several times—the Brochi Army numbers approximately fifteen thousand. Among their soldiers, only those in the front rows wore armor; the rest lacked protection. Their formation appeared loose, lacking morale and any notable momentum."

"Hmm, your observations are thorough," Quintus praised him briefly, reaching out a hand to the side.

The subordinate handed over the already-drafted notes, which Quintus placed in front of Maximus: "Leader, I've compiled our reconnaissance findings and drawn a preliminary sketch for your review."

It was a schematic battle map of both forces' formations, represented by squares and lines, annotated with text.

The map showed that the Nix Tribe's Second Legion occupied the right flank next to the Kolana River, the First Legion was stationed at the center, and the Third Legion controlled the left flank. Correspondingly, the Pannonian Alliance Army's left wing consisted of approximately 15,000 Brochi soldiers, its center housed about 15,000 soldiers of the Maziyi Army, its right wing held forces commanded by Disone and Perustai—amounting to about 12,000 soldiers—with over 1,000 cavalry stationed at the rear.

Maximus examined the map from above and praised it aloud: "Quintus, you've done a great job sketching this—it's exceptionally clear and concise!"

"We simply followed the methods you suggested, Leader," Quintus replied modestly. His words carried sincerity rather than humility; during initial strategic discussions with the Chief Officers of the Military Department, Maximus had proposed the method. Quintus used wooden infantry figurines to illustrate on the map, and Maximus further suggested distinguishing enemy and allied forces with red and blue colors, using block sizes to represent troop numbers, and drawing clear military diagrams—a task made feasible by the tribe's access to suitable paper supplies.

"Quintus, now that the enemy is nearing full deployment, do you have any further recommendations?" Maximus asked.

Quintus pointed to the enemy's right wing on the map and spoke gravely: "Leader, judging from the formation of the four enemy divisions, the forces directly opposing us—Disone and Perustai—have the smallest numbers but are assembling the fastest. Their formation seems tight, and many are armored, suggesting their combat strength surpasses that of the other enemy divisions. This is likely connected to their prolonged conflicts with the northern Boyi people."

Maximus nodded thoughtfully and murmured, "So... we should relocate the Crossbow Soldiers to the right flank to focus our attack on the enemy's left wing?"

"Correct, Leader. Focusing on their left wing has another significant advantage." Quintus moved his finger to the map's rear section of the Pannonian right flank and tapped it twice for emphasis: "This cavalry unit likely belongs to the tribes of Disone and Pedestai, both of which have longstanding hostilities with the Boyi people.

If we focus our attack on the Pannonian right wing, our reserve battalion will have ample space for maneuvers. However, the enemy cavalry will also have room to maneuver and will likely charge with full force to prevent us from breaking through their flank, potentially leading to chaotic combat.

Alternatively, attacking their left wing positions us alongside the Kolana River, allowing for direct frontal assaults. Even if their cavalry receives orders to reinforce the left flank, the distance they must traverse will delay their arrival significantly—by then, the collapse of their left wing may be beyond recovery."

"In that case, we'll concentrate our attack on the enemy's left wing," Maximus decisively concluded. "Deploy the Crossbow Soldiers there! Additionally, move the reserve unit—the First Battalion from the Third Legion—to that location. From here on, everything rests on the soldiers' performance!"

"Understood, Leader," Quintus affirmed.

"Summon Commander Camillus," Maximus turned around and instructed Attendant Marcus, then joked to Quintus, "Since the Second Legion will bear the brunt of the offensive while the Third Legion handles defense and distraction, I hope Camillus won't blame me for this."

Quintus reassured him: "Leader, Camillus is a reasonable man; he wouldn't bear resentment over this. Moreover, you've already clarified that the merit for defeating the enemy and capturing their Great Chief will be credited to the Centurion teams rather than the legions. The officers and soldiers of the Third Legion shouldn't have much to complain about."

"I hope you're right," Maximus sighed lightly. "The Twenty Peerage System drives tribesmen to greater valor, but it also makes them prone to disputes over interests. Every system and decree has its pros and cons!"

Quintus refrained from saying more.

Maximus spoke in a low voice, "I've decided to reward the Staff Department with a Second-class Merit after defeating the Pannonian Army—an acknowledgment of your contributions to this war!"

Quintus' eyes widened in surprise, gazing at Maximus.

Maximus smiled faintly, "Let's go. After meeting Camillus, we'll need to move to the central rear position to oversee the battle."

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Valerius originally joined the Crossbow Soldier training with the intention of returning to the battlefield, but he never imagined that his extensive combat experience and swift mastery of crossbow tactics would earn him a place on the list of candidates for Crossbow Soldier Captain, as deliberated by the Military Department.

When the Military Department submitted the list to Maximus for review, he carefully considered the options before appointing Valerius as Crossbow Soldier Captain, putting him in charge of 600 crossbow soldiers. (Thanks to the weapon workshop's nonstop production, an additional 100 arm crossbows were manufactured before the war, making room for an extra 100 soldiers.)

Upon receiving Maximus's orders, Valerius immediately led the crossbow soldiers from their station behind the central formation to the right flank.

Though the crossbow soldiers were mostly either older or mildly disabled, they had passed the Military Department's assessments and undergone rigorous military training recently; covering three to four miles of hilly terrain in quick succession proved manageable.

Upon reaching the right flank, passing through the formation, and arriving at the front lines, Valerius and his soldiers panted slightly from exertion. Despite the fatigue, they pressed further west to a small hill near the Kolana River's northern bank, where they began deploying into formation.

Valerius divided the crossbow soldiers into two rows of 300 each. To avoid drawing the enemy's attention, he instructed the front row to hand their crossbows and quivers to their comrades in the rear.

After these preparations, Valerius allowed his soldiers to sit down and rest to regain strength. He, however, remained standing, keeping a close eye on enemy movements while waiting for another temporary allied unit to arrive under his command.

Instead, Second Legion Commander Torrelugo arrived first: "Captain Valerius, hearing the leader deploy your crossbow soldiers to assist us brought me immense relief! With your support, our Second Legion is confident we'll crush the enemy and claim first honors!"

Torrelugo spoke excitedly, even instinctively going for an embrace, but hesitated upon seeing Valerius's wrinkled yet stern expression, opting instead for a firm handshake.

"Commander, our crossbow soldiers will give their utmost effort!" Despite his confidence in the unit he led, Valerius's decades of war experience informed his cautious response.

"If there's anything you need from us, please don't hesitate to ask," Torrelugo said enthusiastically.